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*Published in:*  
Global Media Journal – Australian Edition

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Willemsen, S., & Kiss, M. (2017). 'Resistance to Narrative in Narrative Fiction: Excessive Complexity in Quentin Dupieux's *Réalité* (2014)'. *Global Media Journal – Australian Edition*, 11(1), 1-18.

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📌 Volume 11 Issue 1 – 2017

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## Resistance to narrative in narrative film: Excessive complexity in Quentin Dupieux's *Réalité* (2014)

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### Abstract

For a significant share of audiences today, film and serial television form one of the main means of engaging with fictional stories. But in recent years, film and television have also become a site for reflecting on the possibilities and limits of narrative forms, with an abundance of mainstream and arthouse films experimenting with fragmented, ambiguous, contradictory, incoherent, or unreliable storytelling. While many of these complex stories arguably serve to intensify the pleasures of narrative sense-making, some also seem to playfully challenge the fundamental principles of narration and narrativity. This article aims to concentrate on the latter effect, claiming that some contemporary films are taking narrative complexity beyond its classical – i.e. moderate and mimetically motivated – form in order to playfully subvert filmic storytelling principles. As a case in point we examine Quentin Dupieux's [2014] *Réalité* [*Reality*], a film that makes excessive and bold use of narrative paradoxes, contradictions and impossibilities to offer an overtly playful, metafictional resistance to the principles of classical film narration. We argue that *Réalité* presents a case that does not only subvert classical storytelling principles, but also parodies the by now clichéd characteristics of complexifying strategies, as well as the habitual modes of interpretation that viewers have developed to interpret complex films. Hereby, the film demonstrates tongue-in-cheek resistance to the dominant patterns and conventions of popular complex film narratives.

### Introduction

For a significant share of audiences, films and television series form one of the main means of engaging with fiction. Besides being the most prominent suppliers of stories, in recent years both film and television have also become sites for reflecting on the possibilities and limits of narrative forms. Over the past two decades, one can detect a clear trend of experimentation with storytelling

in films and television, manifesting in fragmented, non-linear, ambiguous, contradictory, incoherent, or unreliable narration in popular fiction. In film, the trend of narrative complexity was pioneered by a series of cult hits. Often-cited cornerstones are Quentin Tarantino's [1994] *Pulp Fiction*, Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*) or Christopher Nolan's [2000] *Memento* and grew out into a mainstream phenomenon with complex blockbusters like Nolan's [2010] *Inception* and [2014] *Interstellar* or Doug Liman's [2014] *Edge of Tomorrow*. In the case of television, narrative innovations in serial fiction from Mark Frost and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* [1990-1991] to J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber and Damon Lindelof's *Lost* [2004-2010] seem to have contributed to a positive change in attitude towards the medium, both in academic and popular discourse. Whereas television used to be stereotypically deemed a 'mass medium', with a tendency towards largely conventional and broadly accessible types of fiction, the increasing complexity of serial television has garnered widespread acclaim, with established print media now voicing claims that 'quality' television series are 'the new novels' (Bingham, 2011; Kirsch, 2014) – a label that arguably means to stress both the medium's capacity for formal-structural and thematic depth traditionally attributed to the 'high' arts.

The factors that gave rise to this trend are manifold, and include technological, medial, economic, social, cognitive and cultural aspects that are beyond the scope of what can be discussed in this article<sup>1</sup>. In this contribution, our focus will be on the trend's implications for the conception of 'narrative' in contemporary film. More specifically, the aim is to examine whether complex stories and storytelling in contemporary movies offer a mode of *resistance to narrative* and to *narrativity*. Our particular interest is to find out whether the current wave of narrative experimentation in film can be seen as a challenge to the traditional forms of fiction *via fiction*. In other words, does the increasing complexity in cinematic storytelling *defy* the classical narrative norms and logic of fiction films or does it only provide a *reflection on* these familiar storytelling principles? Additionally, does it perhaps even *reinforce* these by re-negotiating the norms? As we will see below, film theorists have disagreed over whether contemporary complex films represent deconstructions of the rules of classical film narration (e.g., Elsaesser, 2009; Thanouli, 2006; Buckland, 2009; 2014), or mostly just offer playful 'intensifications' of familiar strategies and parameters (e.g. Bordwell, 2002, 2006; Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). By looking at the degree to which complex storytelling in contemporary narrative film can be characterised as 'resisting' narrativity and narrative 'from the inside', our goal is to examine such boundaries more closely.

Although we suggest that most contemporary complex films pose challenges to their viewers that serve to *intensify* the pleasures of narrative sense-making, we will also argue that a share of these films deliberately undermines fundamental principles of narration and narrativity, making such formal play the 'point' of their concept. Although resistance against conventional narrative formats is not a new phenomenon in film history – as a brief historical overview should demonstrate below – we will suggest that its inclusion in more popular modes of storytelling *is* a novelty. We propose that some contemporary films have included reflexive forms of narrative resistance by overtly playing with the limits and (im)possibilities of known narrative forms in order to achieve distinct aesthetic effects. As a case in point, we will closely examine Quentin Dupieux's 2014 film *Réalité* (*Reality*). *Réalité* makes extensive use of narrative paradoxes, contradictions and impossibilities, but simultaneously also relies on conventional and generic formats for its effects. We argue that the film does not only subvert classical storytelling principles, but also that, through its overtly playful and extensive narrative experimentation, it parodies the mainstream trend of narrative complexity, as well as the habitual modes of interpretation that viewers have developed to make sense of such films. By this, we hope to show that by simultaneously negating the rules it plays by, and using formal narrative experimentation to challenge narrative logic, *Réalité* provides an example of tongue-in-cheek resistance to the dominant patterns and conventions of popular fiction. As such, this particular film can be seen as a tipping point in contemporary audio-visual narrative culture, as it may be illustrative for a possible exhaustion or 'maxing out' of the trend of narrative complexity.

## A history of narrative resistance in fiction film

Following its initial phase as primarily a visual attraction (Gunning, 1990), film quickly became a predominantly *narrative* art form. Despite attempts by avant-garde artists to develop a 'pure

cinema', unburdened by the heritage of narrative traditions from theatre and literature<sup>2</sup>, film ultimately established its place as the seventh art primarily as a medium for storytelling. During the first decades of the 20th century, a set of basic principles of film narration emerged – 'rules of thumb' that remain in place to this day. These principles were followed because they ensured the highest degree of accessibility and comprehensibility for cinematic narratives. But besides the continuous and ongoing popularity of this universal film style, there has also been a history of resistance against it – i.e. a history of narrative films that problematise or fully turn against the dominant narrative forms. For a long time, this resistance could be understood in terms of a simple division, while the dominant style of *classical narration* provided an unobtrusive, mimetic-realist mode of storytelling that aimed at facilitating unproblematised film viewing, *art cinema* was the institution that constantly challenged, undermined or expanded those classical storytelling principles on various artistic grounds.

'Classical Narration' denotes the mimetic-realist 'Hollywood style' of filming and storytelling mode that has been dominant from the early 20th century onwards (Bordwell, 1985: pp. 156-204; Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985). Although film styles are in constant development, the basic principles of classical narration remained relatively stable for over a century<sup>3</sup>. Typically, classical narration centres on protagonists, usually active and psychologically transparent characters, who are driven towards the fulfillment of clear goals for which certain obstacles need to be overcome. The narration is structured in such a way that viewers can effortlessly integrate the presented events into a coherent, chronological chain with a clear cause and effect logic, ultimately leading to some kind of closure. Information and events can be narrated out of order, but only to further maximise suspense, absorption, or affective impact; and if so, conventional markers will signal these shifts (as occurs with most cinematic flashbacks) and ensure viewers' ability to keep track of the events. The logic of classical narratives is commonly of a 'teleological' nature, meaning that the events integrated in the story are 'necessary' in the sense that they lead up to an outcome – one that provides closure with regards to key goals, questions and problems posed in the story.

Furthermore, classical narratives usually take place in worlds that correspond more or less to the experience of our everyday world, at least in terms of spatiotemporal, logical, and physical laws. When storyworlds deviate from this logic and laws, the deviances will be explicitly indicated by the narration, or dictated by implicit, conventionalised generic codes (like the existence of elves in fantasy or the possibility of time travel in science fiction). Consequently, classical film narration is a relatively stable and recognisable mode of presentation, with its own stylistic and storytelling principles that imply an unproblematised sense of *realism*. Secondly, it also exerts a particular teleological, ontological and epistemologically objective and familiar logic onto the events, presupposing a knowable and consistent *reality*.

Resistance to these classical narrative devices was usually located in the domain of what is known as 'art cinema'. Although no clear definition of 'art cinema' exists, scholars and critics generally agree on the term's function in designating a distinct tradition of filmmaking that works outside the narrative as well as the stylistic, institutional and economic realms of the dominant and popular classical narrative mode of the mainstream. In narrative terms, art films have frequently sought to (partially) substitute the classical storytelling principles of realism and logic to allow other topics or modes of expression to emerge. In David Bordwell's words, the key trait of art-cinema narration was always that it 'defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode' (Bordwell, 1979, p. 57). This open resistance has taken many forms, ranging from the surrealism and expressionism of pre-World War II avant-gardes (e.g. the films of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, Germaine Dulac, Maya Deren, or Jean Cocteau) to the post-war tradition of cinematic modernism (such as the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, or Jean-Luc Godard). Like modernist and postmodern experiments in literature (see McHale, 1984), art films have worked against the conventions of classical narrative realism out of an implicit belief that such approaches could retrieve something of our being-in-the-world that is supposedly lost in conventional narrative representation: an emphasis on subjective experiences, the more associative logic of stream of consciousness, the expression of non-linearity and fragmentation of experience under heavy emotional stress, the ambiguities fundamental to the human condition, or the ultimate capturing of the *reality* hidden under the disguise of *representation*.

Art films have used an array of narrative strategies to question, reinvent or reflect on conventional classical modes of storytelling. The extensive taxonomies of art-cinema narration provided by David Bordwell (1979; 1985) and András Bálint Kovács (2007) offer a comprehensive basis to discern the variety of strategies by which art films have related to the logic of classical narratives. For instance, many art films have dismantled classical narration's epistemological assumptions, questioning its unproblematised notions of 'truth' and intrinsic presumptions of transparency, realism, and objectivity. Art films frequently foreground more relativistic, subjective, or ambiguous notions of truth, and often also ask viewers to actively co-construe narrative verisimilitude and meaning. As Torben Grodal has noted:

... [t]he term *idealist* could be applied (...) to many art film narratives. In art films, the problem of interpreting and understanding the world precedes concrete action and often renders it impossible (2009, p. 222).

Other films have expressed similar resistance to classical narrative logic via their approach to characters. Films like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* [1960] or *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, [1963]), for example, deny viewers the identification with transparent, rational, and goal-oriented protagonists, and instead explore the stories of central characters who are aimless, bored, confused, alienated, hesitant, unstable, passive, or, in the case of *L'avventura*, even disappear halfway through the story. Other art films have sought resistance against the tight logic of classical narration by looking for a more 'objective realism' and attempting to be more 'true to life' (see Bordwell, 1985, pp. 205-233). Prominent examples of this can be found in the Italian Neorealist tradition (think of films like Vittorio De Sica's [1948] *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*)), which, apart from aiming at more natural styles of filming and acting, emphasised open ended, episodic, slice-of-life stories without clear causal, goal-oriented trajectories. Some experiments in art-cinema storytelling and story structure are explicitly *meta-fictional* and *self-reflexive*, in the sense that they explicitly problematise or underline the 'constructedness' of (their) fiction, the limits of narrative, or the paradoxes of representation.

Some films achieve this by incorporating strong and clear logical impossibilities into their narrative structures, like the mutually exclusive versions of events in Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, [1961]) that destabilise the objective ontology and logic of the classical narrative (a strategy comparable to those found in the high-modernist literary movement of the *nouveau roman*). Other art films have deliberately sought to bare the devices of classical narration and film style; famous are the films of Jean-Luc Godard, which repeatedly dismantled the conventions and norms of classical film style, seeking to uncover the expectations and ideologies implicit in classical films in a Brechtian manner.

## **Motivated and moderate narrative puzzles in contemporary film**

Over the years, the divide between the mimetic-realism of classical film narratives on the one hand and art-cinema as a site of resistance on the other seems to have become somewhat less clear-cut. The blending of these modes arguably began in the 'post-classical' phase of the 'New Hollywood' of the late 1960s and 1970s, when popular American cinema started to incorporate narrative and stylistic elements from European art films (cf. films such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967], Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968], or Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* [1976]). The current trend of narrative complexity, which gained its momentum from the mid-1990s onwards, seems to form a new (and intensified) version of this crossover of narration styles. Popular films are now full of stories and storytelling strategies that play with classical principles, featuring narrators who are not to be trusted (e.g. *The Usual Suspects*), narration that misleads viewers (*The Sixth Sense*), authors who appear in their stories (*Adaptation*) or characters who appear to their authors (*Stranger Than Fiction*), storyworlds that push the boundaries of the logically possible and comprehensible (time-travel stories like *Looper* or the multi-dimensional structure of *Interstellar*), narration that seems to randomly reshuffle its temporal organisation (*Pulp Fiction*), elaborate set-ups of multiple embedded story levels (*Inception*), stories that turn non-linearity into a feature of their storyworld (*Arrival*) or of the experience of their characters

(*Memento*), and so on.

Many scholars and critics have argued for the narrative novelty of these contemporary ‘puzzle films’ (Buckland, 2009; 2014), and some have ascribed resistant and subversive tendencies to these films’ approaches to narration (e.g. Thanouli, 2006, 2009; Elsaesser, 2009). Proponents of this position often identify complex film narratives as re-negotiations or even deconstructions of the principles that governed the classical film narrative, such as linearity, causality, coherence and congruity, or the relative trustworthiness and transparency of narration. However, we do *not* think that puzzle films fundamentally ‘resist’ narrative or classical narration. In our view, most of the films that are part of this contemporary trend retain nearly all of the principles of classical film mode, albeit in intensified or complicated forms (see Kiss, 2013, p. 247). Although they certainly provide new and innovative takes on popular film narration, most puzzle films keep the basic elements of classical narration firmly in place, rather than questioning or overthrowing these (Bordwell, 2002; 2006; Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). We find that their narration is still governed by classical narrative principles in the sense that their complexity is *motivated* and *moderate*.

By *motivated* we mean that the formal-structural complexity of puzzle films is often motivated within the presented storyworld. The temporal inversion of *Memento*, for example, is motivated by the protagonist suffering from anterograde amnesia; in *Looper* and *Inception* the complexity of the curling and embedded story structures is motivated by fantastic storyworlds (which allow time travel and dream invasions, respectively). The formally complex storytelling thus exactly serves the mimetic and diegetic properties of storyworlds, instead of problematising viewers’ access to them, as many modernist art films do.

By characterising this complexity as *moderate*, we intend to point out that most contemporary complex films keep the potentially confusing aspects of their stories and storytelling within limits that remain cognitively manageable for their viewers. Although the narration of puzzle films may be temporarily confusing, it usually does not aim to fully disconcert its viewers or to ultimately threaten narrative coherence. In fact, most puzzle films feature only one or a few complex storytelling techniques in an otherwise classical narrative embedding. For instance, if one looks at the popular example of *Inception*, it is apparent that although the film presents a structure of multiple-layered story levels, it does so with self-restraint and through clear signposted narration, similar to that of other popular blockbuster films. As David Bordwell has argued:

... filmmakers balance potentially confusing innovations (...) with heightened appeal to those forms and formulas that viewers know well. Artists should test the limits of story comprehension, but those very limits, and the predictable patterns they yield, remain essential to our dynamic experience of narrative (2002, p. 103).

*Inception*’s moderately complicated story structure is an example of this trade off, resulting in cases of ‘mainstream complexity’ (Kiss, 2012). The amount of embedded layers in *Inception* is restricted to five; all are characterised by clear stylistic markers, and adhere to a strict organisation and consistent diegetic rules. These rules are also communicated to viewers through redundant explanation and explication in character dialogues. Through repeated stylistic patterns, internal consistency, and redundant information and communication, director Nolan ensures that his viewers are able to infer the film’s logic and follow its fairly complex story.

In short, although the result is certainly more challenging – in terms of narrative comprehension – than the average Hollywood blockbuster, films like *Inception* keep most classical storytelling principles in place and allow viewers to use the habitual sense-making strategies that they have developed through repeatedly watching classical narrative fiction. The pleasures of these puzzle films, we would argue, lies not so much in that they challenge or resist narrativity, but rather in their encouragement and satisfaction of *intensified narrativisation* efforts<sup>4</sup>. They offer puzzles that challenge viewers to put in more cognitive effort to mentally (re)construct the story in question, and they ultimately reward those efforts with a more or less coherent and comprehensible story (in the case of *Inception*, with a motivated ambiguity between two possible interpretations at the film’s

ending). These films have introduced a distinctly ‘self-conscious’ style of narration into popular film, highlighting storytelling as a craft beyond the mimetic and diegetic concerns of the story. Part of the appreciation of watching puzzle films arguably comes from recognising the narrative’s self-conscious ‘cleverness’, which strategically creates confusion first before restoring coherence later. Puzzle films often seek to baffle audiences through what has been called an ‘operational aesthetic’, making viewers aware (and appreciative) of the mechanisms that are being used and the games that are being played<sup>5</sup>. By these means, narrative complexity inspires new modes of viewership, encouraging fan communities to engage in online discussions and ‘forensic fandom’ (Mittell, 2006) and to decipher their puzzles with regards to both stories and storytelling.

Above we briefly discussed whether contemporary puzzle films resist the dominance of classical principles to a similar extent as art cinema has done. We argued that due to their balanced – motivated and moderate – complexity, the majority of puzzle films hardly opposes, but rather intensifies viewers’ meaning-making routines habituated by classical narrative logic. In this sense we tend to agree with Bordwell and Thompson’s conclusion, according to which ‘*Inception* might be complicated rather than complex’ (2013, p. 53). ‘Resistance’ to narrative, therefore, does not seem the appropriate term for these kinds of cases, and we propose to reserve it for complexifications that go beyond mere complication by undermining narrativity and narrative conventions more profoundly.

## Intensified complexities and impossible puzzles

Among contemporary complex films are some cases that do go beyond the limits of motivated and moderate ‘mainstream complexity’, and that do push their viewers’ efforts of narrative comprehension and interpretation in more radical directions. These are the cases that we have labeled ‘impossible puzzle films’ (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017). Impossible puzzle films belong to the same wave of contemporary complex films described above, but are distinct in that they truly – that is, exceedingly and pervasively – complexify the viewing experience to the extent of upsetting viewers’ narrativising efforts. Films like David Lynch’s [2001] *Mulholland Drive*, Richard Kelly’s [2001] *Donnie Darko*, Shane Carruth’s [2004] *Primer*, Nacho Vigalondo’s [2007] *Los cronocrímenes* (*Timecrimes*), Christopher Smith’s [2009] *Triangle*, or Denis Villeneuve’s [2013] *Enemy*, are examples of films that feature pervasive gaps, ambiguities, paradoxes or logical contradictions in their narration. Their narrative structures undermine (parts of) their narrative logic, coherence, and congruity, and may frustrate viewers’ efforts to construct coherent narratives out of the complexified flow of information. Moreover, compared to the motivated and moderate complexity of the average puzzle film, most of these impossible puzzle films lack clear mimetic motivations for their intricate formal make-ups<sup>6</sup> and, in terms of the degree of their complexity, go *beyond* most mainstream complex films, often up to the point of leaving no clear markers or indications by which viewers can understand or infer their story-logic. We use the term ‘impossible puzzles’ *not* to imply that these films are supposedly impossible to interpret or resolve (after all, a quick online search shows that many viewers do come up with interpretive solutions to these films), but rather to highlight that the narration of these films offers no clear, explicit resolution for the gaps, paradoxes, ambiguities or incongruities that they feature (as opposed to most ‘regular’ puzzle films, which tend to offer relieving or surprising resolutions). The extensive and pervasive complexity of these films tends to give rise to anomalies, paradoxes, or enigmas that remain open ended, ambiguous, or contradictory.

Should such films then be considered as cases of *resistance* against the ‘realist’ narrativity of canonical fiction films? On the one hand, they are still very much *narrative* films. Although most impossible puzzle films seriously challenge classical norms and rules, they do so without abolishing these principles altogether; they use traditional narrative techniques and often include rather canonical and generic story patterns, evoking all the expectations and conventions that come with them. On the other hand, however, they also severely thwart habitualised viewing strategies, since they do not allow viewers to infer traditionally coherent – linear, causal or teleological – narrative trajectories. In *Mulholland Drive*, for instance, what starts out as a seemingly conventional (although distinctly ‘Lynchian’) crime mystery, gradually disintegrates into an intricately surreal and dreamy collection of scenes, with loose or unclear connections between non-chronologically presented events, locations, and characters. In this sense, the narration of

impossible puzzle films draws from both the classical as well as the art-cinema mode of narration: these films borrow genre- and style elements and story patterns from the classical film tradition, evoking the viewing expectations that come with these, while, at the same time, they also incorporate pervasively paradoxical, incoherent, or ambiguous story structures more reminiscent of modernist art films. Impossible puzzle films thereby evoke lasting dissonances within their storyworlds, their storytelling structures and, ultimately, also in the viewing experience they offer. They play on the boundaries of narrativity, hampering the coherence, logic and transparency of both stories and storytelling, but without fully putting viewers off.

The refusal of impossible puzzle films to adhere to classical storytelling principles of coherence, logic, congruity and comprehensibility can serve *self-reflexive* and *metafictional* purposes that were traditionally solely the domain of art cinema. Some of these films pose their impossible puzzles for the puzzle's sake, taking pleasure in undermining narrativity and misleading viewer expectations for reasons that do not seem primarily thematically or ideologically motivated. We suggest that this is the domain where *narrative resistance* becomes the drive, and, therefore, the 'noteworthiness' or 'point' of such films. 'Resistance' here is not necessarily directed against thematic, ideological, theoretical or conceptual concerns; resisting narrativity can also form a playful, self-reflexive artistic strategy in itself, one with a capacity to comment on the broader tradition of narrative filmmaking too. To illustrate this thesis, let us highlight the particular case of Quentin Dupieux' [2014] film *Réalité* – the overt, bold, and excessive complexity of which does not only embody, but also parodies its own genetic and generic context, namely that of the trend of contemporary complex cinema.

## **A case study: *Réalité***

In brief, the common 'point' of most contemporary puzzle films is to pull off a complex story by complicating known classical standards, and to invite viewers to admire the clever narrative make-up by which the storytelling works. The correlation of these rather self-conscious aims forms a trend that includes typical formal-structural tricks (non-linearity, inversions, unreliabilities, embedded and loop structures etc.), typical scenarios (parallel universes, character multiplications, time travel, etc.), and typical viewer responses (see Alber, 2013; Kiss & Willemsen, 2017)<sup>7</sup>.

What is remarkable about Quentin Dupieux's *Réalité* is that it draws on *all* these features and effects to present a highly exaggerated and bold take on this trend. The film's over-complicated narrativity results in an impossible story – impossible not only in that it does not seem to allow stable sense-making or unambiguous interpretation, but even in that it already proves difficult to capture and describe its extremely convoluted plot. Dupieux's own words are telling about the challenge, although his summary does not do justice to the film's full complexity:

*Reality* is almost impossible to pitch. Like, if you say what's on the screen, you'll go, 'Okay, there's a girl, she finds a tape in a hog, and then she wants to see what's on the VHS tape. And there's also a filmmaker who's trying to pitch a movie to a producer, and then he has to find a girl' (Fragoso, 2015).

Instead of describing the full story here, let us try to illustrate the complexity by citing critics who have struggled to define *Réalité* as a 'Matryoshka nesting doll' plot (Rechtsaffen, 2015) featuring 'dreams-within-dreams and films-within-films' (Brody, 2015), 'if the word "plot" is not misleading when applied to this mind-melting and self-devouring film' (O'Hehir, 2015). In the words of the *New York Times*' Ben Kenigsberg, it seems like '[e]ach narrative fissure further thwarts meaning' (Kenigsberg, 2015).

Rather than reconstructing all the convoluted narrative trajectories, let us focus here on one particular scene. Towards the end of the film, *Réalité*'s various interwoven storylines culminate in a climactic scene – a point that is traditionally reserved for a clever twist or revelation that ties a complex film narrative's loose ends together and resolves its intricacies. In Dupieux' film, however, the showdown creates even more confusion. Let us tease out the ingredients of this metaleptically interlocked scene.



The film's climactic part opens with a scene with a little girl called Reality (Kyla Kenedy) watching a mysterious blue VHS tape, which, so we have learned earlier, has been found inside of a wild boar shot by her father (Figure 1).



Figure 1

The following shot reveals that this scene (and perhaps this entire storyline) has been part of a test screening of a movie in the make, which is being watched by the film's director Zog (John Glover) and producer Bob Marshall (Jonathan Lambert) (Figure 2).



Figure 2

In a parallel scene, the protagonist and also filmmaker Jason Tantra (Alain Chabat), who we have been following in his struggle to find funding for a new movie, fears he is losing his mind when confronted with his own doppelgänger (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Convinced that he is stuck 'in a nightmare', he reports himself to a mental hospital and calls his producer Bob (Figure 4).

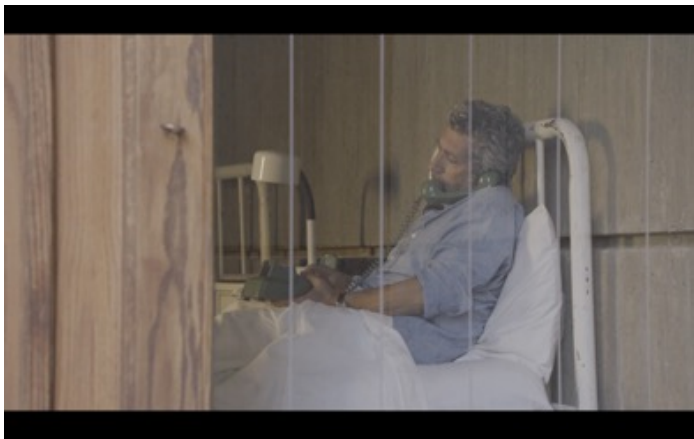


Figure 4

At this point an impossible metalepsis occurs between the two parallel scenes. When Jason's call is picked up by producer Bob at the test screening, we realise that this phone conversation is happening *right now* as well as recorded *already* as being part of the film that director Zog is presenting to Bob: in other words, the girl watching a videotape onscreen turns out to be watching Jason making the very phone call that is answered by Bob sitting in the theatre, in real time (Figure 5). In narrative terms, Jason's phone call is both part of the apparent reality-frame as well as of the framed, test-screened film. In Chloé Galibert-Lainé's words 'this is such a dense reframing; it's almost a deframing' (Galibert-Lainé, 2015).



Figure 5

And as if this would not have been confusing enough, the next scene opens yet another narrative perspective. It encompasses the preceding metaleptic chaos from the outside, when Jason (re-re- or re-de-) frames the above scene of the test screening (in which he himself featured) as part of his planned movie, which is being produced by Bob, and which, in turn, is most likely the film we are watching (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>8</sup>



Figures 6 and 7

The narratively complex and ontologically impossible constellation presented within these ten dense minutes can be captured in its entirety (Figure 8).

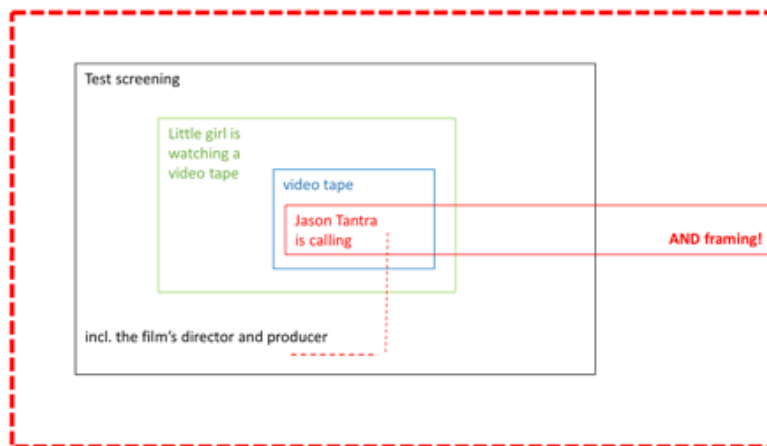


Figure 8

Besides its bold cognitively dissonant structure, what is remarkable about this scene is that it brings into play and combines many of the elements of an archetypal complex film. Dupieux invokes and blends many of the typical narrative forms of contemporary complex fiction, including (1) the *formal structural tricks* that make up most contemporary complex films, (2) the typical *fictional scenarios* that emerge from these formal structural experimentations, and (3) the conventional *interpretive responses* by which viewers can naturalise such offbeat narrative events. However, the dense and combined manifestations of these elements in *Réalité* take on such excessive, incongruous, or exaggerated forms that their functions no longer appear to be narrative, but rather tip over into what most viewers will probably interpret as parody or absurdity. Let us

briefly examine these ingredients one by one.

(1) Earlier we already listed some of the typical *formal-structural* tricks that have been frequently used and popularised by contemporary complex films, including non-linear structures, multiple embedded story levels with metaleptic transgressions, unreliabilities, and story loops. *Réalité* makes use of many such typical (and perhaps in 2014 already conventionalised) complicating devices; but rather than utilising these devices in service of an intensified narrative viewing experience, it uses familiar narrative forms *against narrativity*.

By introducing (multiple) story paths that are intertwined in variously complex ways – formal set-ups for which scholars invented terms such as ‘network narratives’ (Bordwell, 2006, p. 100) ‘modular narratives’ (Cameron, 2008) or ‘multiform narratives’ (Campora, 2014) – regular puzzle films tend to intensify the pleasures of narrative forensics and its payoff in comprehension. *Réalité* likewise presents a variety of storylines that are interconnected,<sup>9</sup> but the film constantly plays with multiple, mutually exclusive connections between these. Sometimes the story paths are connected causally or by spatiotemporal proximity, whereas in other moments they are suddenly embedded in each other as dreams, or inhabit different story levels (like in the scene described above). The global structure hereby forms an impossible constellation, riddled with contradictions and cognitive dissonances, often suggesting that scenes are both the framing and the framed.

In short, *Réalité* interconnects its entangled plotlines and scenes, but it does so in contradictory, paradoxical, or dead-end ways that leave little traditional narrative logic or consistency intact. Whereas the enjoyment of the typical ‘puzzle film’ is hinged upon the viewers’ recognition of the film’s *self-conscious* narration (in both creating confusion and in restoring coherence and meaning), these very same formal techniques become *self-reflexive* and *meta-fictional* in the impossible puzzle of *Réalité*, where the storytelling devices no longer serve a coherent story(world), but seem to only enforce complexity for complexity’s sake.

(2) Additionally, *Réalité* also plays with – and mainly makes ineffective – some of the typical *fictional scenarios* that populate much of contemporary complex fiction. As we noted, puzzle films usually include diegetic motivations for their complexity, featuring scenarios that naturalise their formal play such as time-travel, different story-levels within the story, or hallucinating or dreaming characters. *Réalité* seems to offer exaggerated versions of these recurring story tropes. Most evidently, it plays with the metaleptic tropes of the movie-within-a-movie or the dream-within-a-dream formula. Regarding the former, there is a history of (complex) narrative films featuring scenarios about directors and filmmakers working on artworks within the artwork, ranging from Federico Fellini’s modernist tour de force *8½* [1963] to Charlie Kaufman’s self-reflexive narrative experimentations like *Adaptation* [2002] or *Synecdoche, New York* [2008]. Such scenarios often function to playfully destabilise viewers’ notions of the ontological boundaries of fiction – i.e. between the fiction within the fiction, between fictional artworks and the actual work, between characters and authors, or between fictional authors and their real-world equivalents. Indeed, such complex transgressions can have an uncanny self-reflexive effect, for, as Jorge-Luis Borges noted, ‘if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious’ (Borges 1964, p. 46).

*Réalité*, in a tongue-in-cheek way, complicates and recombines these metaleptic scenarios *ad absurdum*. Let us recapitulate the scenarios surrounding protagonist Jason Tantra: he is a filmmaker struggling to finance his new movie idea – an idea that involves the bizarre premise of television sets attacking humankind through invisible, deadly radio waves (a ludicrous concept that is strikingly comparable to actual author Quentin Dupieux’ satirical horror film *Rubber* [2010] and its homicidal car tyre). However, we also learn that Jason’s struggle is also part of *another* filmmaker’s project, as Jason appears in the screened film of the little girl watching a videotape showing his misfortunes. Then we realize that Jason himself paradoxically further frames these events as part of *another* new film, which, one might suppose, should then be the film that we are watching. In short, the film-in-the-film scenario that could justify the metaleptic movements here roams unstably in all directions – from a planned film within a film, to being itself part of another film in the film, which is embedded in another planned film, which might be the actual film that the viewer is watching – making it a case of complexity for the sake of complexity only. Similarly

exaggerated games are played with the dream trope – another common scenario of complex cinema – with many of *Réalité*'s scenes being incompatibly embedded in others (and each other) as dreams or nightmares. Also, by means of a looping plot, Dupieux invokes another common scenario of contemporary complex cinema, namely the duplication of characters. The motif of the character multiplications recurs frequently in both traditional and impossible puzzle films, and the diegetic motivations for it can range from Doppelgänger scenarios that function as plot devices foregrounding their characters' psychological vulnerabilities, to plots in which the duplication forms a fantastical anomaly, and cases that seem somewhere in between (cf. the multiplications in films like *The Double*, *Lost Highway*, *Fight Club*, *Schizopolis*, *Enemy*, *Triangle*, *Coherence*, or *Timecrimes*). Jason's encounter with another version of himself (Figure 3), however, is an eccentric version of these, having no narrative or other mimetic motivation beyond the isolated scene's outright absurdity. In sum, in all of these cases from *Réalité*, familiar complex narrative scenarios are incongruously combined and blown up to outlandish proportions that appear to transgress any mimetic or expressive function.

(3) Lastly, as a consequence of its refusal to comply with familiar narrative techniques and scenarios, *Réalité* also upsets the interpretive habits and conventions by which viewers have learned to make sense of complex storytelling. By presenting known plot patterns from complex films and genres of metafiction, *Réalité* may tempt viewers to draw from the conventional pathways of dealing with fictional oddities and dissonances, but the film ultimately refuses any of the interpretive stability or closure that such readings might usually provide. For instance, through *Réalité*'s recurring theme of dreams and nightmares, viewers may resort to the conventional frame of 'subjective realist' interpretation (Bordwell, 1985; Campora, 2014), attributing the instabilities in the narrative to the mental state or fantasy of one of the characters. Conversely, some viewers might also be tempted to draw on the interpretive frame of 'objective realism' (Bordwell, 1985) or metafictional concepts, reading the film as an attempt to come closer to reality by deconstructing modes and layers of representation<sup>10</sup>. All in all, critic Andrew O'Hehir aptly sums up the experience of interpretive multiplicity, if not frustration, in which *Réalité* leaves viewers seeking for meaning or cohesion:

... it's not nearly enough to describe "Reality" as a satire about the making of a nonexistent but terrible movie, or a meta-commentary about the making of the film we're watching. Those ingredients are in the mix, but largely in deceptive fashion and as a means to a hallucinatory and unstable end that is almost impossible to define. The film (...) gradually layers these elements into a hilarious and increasingly disturbing series of looping, overlapping and interconnected narratives worthy of Flann O'Brien or Diderot, in which all distinctions between fiction and reality, dreams and waking life, the self and others, appear to dissolve (O'Hehir, 2015).

By having its puzzled characters also engage in such interpretive struggles, the film even explicitly ridicules the futility of the common ways of making sense of complex narratives. When Jason confronts his double, he calls his producer to report that he cannot continue working because he is 'literally in a nightmare'. When Jason encounters the television cooking show presenter who is also desperately trying to make sense of his own unfortunate predicament, the presenter tells him with all seriousness that he thinks that 'we might be the same person.' The paradox of the 'objective realism' frame, in turn, seems to be played upon and satirised through documentary maker Zog, whose filmic attempt to come closer to reality is to never turn the camera off while filming an ordinary little girl by the name Reality. To further feed any dead-end hermeneutic inquiries that viewers may embark on, *Réalité* also features strikingly recurring but underdetermined symbols, such as the blue videotape (remarkably comparable to the blue box in *Mulholland Drive*) for which an array of possible functions and meanings can be devised. The ultimate meta-comment on the film's ostentatiously unresolvable and ludicrous complexity comes from producer Bob's enthralled response to the impossible metaleptic phone call (Figure 5): 'I'm flabbergasted. ... I don't know how to tell you, I'm flabbergasted. ... Right now I'm speechless. My brain is in my socks.'

In moments like these, *Réalité* self-consciously and somewhat hyperbolically prefigures, mirrors,

and ultimately parodies the reactions and interpretive hypotheses that puzzled viewers usually have.

## Excessive complexity as narrative resistance

In sum, there is no moderation in or diegetic motivation behind the density and boldness of *Réalité*'s intricate stories and storytelling manipulations – at least not in any traditional narrative sense. The complexity can be characterised as 'excessive' because it no longer serves the story or its modes of mimetic expression, but rather seems to let complexity proliferate for complexity's sake only. We argued that in most contemporary complex 'puzzle films', narrative matters are complicated in order to invite viewers into problem-solving games and to maximise the effect of the resolution. But *Réalité* seems to aim at a different kind of effect. Its amplified version of complex storytelling creates an impossible puzzle, the function or 'point' of which is *neither* to offer a luring puzzle or a comprehensible story, *nor* to impress its audiences with clever and elaborate narrative fireworks. Rather, by offering defiantly *pointless*, deadpan versions of classical and complex stories and narrative tactics, its main concern seems to be meta-diegetic and reflexive – an indulgence in exceedingly complex stories and excessive story manipulations for the sake of commenting on and parodying clichéd *diegetic*, *narrative* and *interpretive* scenarios<sup>11</sup>.

Returning to our leading question, we would argue that *Réalité* provides a case of contemporary fiction film *resisting narrative*, or, perhaps rather offering *resistance to narrative* (even complex narrative) *through narrative*. Dupieux's film thwarts narrative logic and coherence, *not* by fully abandoning narrativity, but by playing with, undermining, negating, and ultimately reflecting on the rules of the game. By simultaneously evoking familiar conventions and tropes from complex stories and storytelling, as well as the viewers' interpretive routines that go with these, *Réalité* turns principles of film narration and narrative comprehension *against* narrative logic. In this regard, the film is exemplary for the broader trend of films that we labelled 'impossible puzzle films', albeit a particularly unique and overdriven case. *Réalité* can be taken as a sign of a trend 'tipping over' – an audiovisual self-reflection of contemporary audiovisual storytelling by satirically exaggerating the formal games, aims, and pleasures of popular complex movies, to the point where mocking playfulness turns into rejection and resistance.

One could argue that *Réalité* has affinities to the art-cinema tradition; after all, it does set out to deconstruct the norms and logic of classical film narration in a similar vein. But *Réalité*'s mode of resistance also seems to be of a different nature: its subversive tendencies do not seem to find their roots in any political or ideological grounds (like with the Brechtian 'Verfremdungseffekt' in the films of Jean-Luc Godard or the young Bernardo Bertolucci, or the 'idealist' epistemological positions that Torben Grodal attributed to the art-cinema), nor are they attempts to expand the mimetic and expressive potentialities of the art form (such as the subjective and objective realist modes that David Bordwell discerns, or the deliberately weakened narrativity of 'pure cinema') – in fact, the film even seems to treat such sincere intentions with a dose of cynicism. *Réalité*'s resistance rather seems to be purely playful and metafictional. Nevertheless, some might read the film's resistance as an indirectly ideological critique on narrative logic at large: *Réalité*'s deliberate obstruction of narrative form and narrative sense-making may be taken as questioning the *logic* and coherence that narrativity imposes as a mode of grasping, framing, and organising the world. After all, making narrativity *fail* can also be a strategy to foreground the contingency, irregularity, chaos, unpredictability, and instability of the world over the causal, logical, coherent and teleological organisation of canonical narratives (or perhaps even to critique the dominant objectifying logic implied in the modern, Western worldview). In any case, for viewers willing to go along with its mischievous games, *Réalité*'s resistance to narrative can offer an opportunity for both cognitive and cultural self-reflection: cognitive in that it upsets some of our very habitual narrative inferences and meaning-making routines, putting up for reflection the limits of our distinctly human ways of making sense of the world through narrativity; and cultural in the sense that it foregrounds the limits of narrative expression and narrative form, highlighting the delicacy of the implicit, often unquestioned logic of the stories that most of us consume on a daily basis. As such, narrative resistance can be an aesthetic end in itself.

## Notes

1 Reference See, among others, Manovich (2001); Kinder (2002); Mulvey (2006); Johnson (2006); Cameron (2008); Ang (2011); Kiss (2012); Mittell (2015); Kiss and Willemsen (2017).

2 One can think here of early avant-garde approaches to cinema such as those found in the films of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, René Clair, or Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. For examples of essayistic writings on the avant-garde's ambitions and attempts to free film from traditional narrative forms, in favour of a 'pure cinema', see Germaine Dulac's (1926) essay 'Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral Cinégraphie' or Maya Deren's (1960) 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality'.

3 Cognitive film theory has offered an explanatory framework to understand the relative stability of the classical film style, hypothesizing that the style's ubiquitous success is the result of its accommodation and mimicking of universally human cognitive and perceptual capacities – see for instance Joseph D. Anderson's ecological-cognitive account (Anderson, 1996).

4 In Monika Fludernik's seminal cognitive theory of *natural narratology*, 'narrativization' comprises the reading or viewing activity of making artefacts or events narrative by assigning a cognitive frame that imposes narrativity; by this cognitive process, the spectator naturalises the artefact as a story by recourse to narrative schemas (Fludernik, 1996, p. 34).

5 The term is borrowed from Neil Harris (1973), and adapted to complexities in contemporary television series by Jason Mittell (2006, p. 36; 2015, p. 42).

6 Although this need not always be the case – for instance both *Primer* or *Timecrimes* do include science-fictional time-machines that 'explain' their warped time structures.

7 Jan Alber outlined a model that describes nine responses by which readers can make sense of unnatural – that is, humanly, logically, or physically impossible – events in fiction (Alber, 2013, pp. 76–79). We have applied and updated these to describe viewers' strategies with regards to the challenges of complex cinema (Kiss & Willemsen, 2017).

8 This narrative trick and its cognitive effect are comparable to the one of Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*.

9 These include the story of Jason Tantra trying to realise his new film idea, the story of the little girl and the videotape, the documentary maker Zog capturing the little girl's life, producer Bob Marshall who is working with both directors, and a number of other subplots woven through the film, such as the story of a presenter of a television cooking show wearing a mouse suit and suffering from a mysterious eczema attack, and a school principal who may or may not spend his free time driving around a military jeep in women's clothes, among others.

10 For instance, the *Montreal Gazette* noted that in *Réalité*, '[f]ilmmaking itself is playfully deconstructed as a way of framing the world' (Dunlevy, 2015).

11 In its playful, bold, and ultimately self-reflexive take on narrative complexity, *Réalité* is comparable to Steven Soderbergh's hilariously off-beat and absurd *Schizopolis* [1996].

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